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Letter dated 16 November 2011 from the Permanent Representative of Uzbekistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to convey to the attached information, "Uzbekistan — a country of historical tolerance and cultural pluralism" (see annex).

I would highly appreciate if you could circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the General Assembly under agenda item 15.

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Annex to the letter dated 16 November 2011 from the Permanent Representative of Uzbekistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

[Original: Russian]

Uzbekistan — a country of historical tolerance and cultural pluralism

The first International Day for Tolerance was proclaimed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on 16 November 1995. On that date the twenty-eighth session of the UNESCO General Conference, held in Paris, adopted in its resolution 5.61 the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance. The purpose of those Principles, in keeping with the resolve of the UNESCO member States, is to "take all positive measures necessary to promote tolerance" as a cherished principle and a necessity for peace and for the economic and social advancement of all peoples. The solemn proclamation of an annual International Day for Tolerance was enshrined in article 6 of the Declaration.

The Declaration defines tolerance as "respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. It is harmony in difference. It is not only a moral duty, it is also a political and legal requirement. Tolerance [is] the virtue that … contributes to the replacement of the culture of war by a culture of peace."

Since the early days of independence in Uzbekistan, particular emphasis has been placed on maintaining an atmosphere of peace and harmony in the country. The national Constitution serves as a robust legal guarantee of freedom of religion for members of all faiths, including Islam, Orthodoxy, Judaism, Catholicism and others. The Act on freedom of conscience and religious organizations was adopted early on, during the first years of independence, and is in full compliance with the relevant international law.

Uzbekistan is a secular State, but it is now rightly regarded as one of the centres of Islamic culture and philosophy. It was after our country became independent that the names and legacies of the forefathers of the Uzbek people — Islamic theologians and philosophers — were restored to their previous stature. These include such figures as Imam al-Bukhari, the well-known Muslim theologian and author of the most respected and authoritative Sunni anthology of *hadiths*, entitled *Al-Djami as-Sahih*; and Hakim al-Termezi, a well-known scholar and philosopher and one of the founders of Islamic doctrine. Their writings and work are the subject of systematic study that has promoted the preservation of their tremendous spiritual legacy, which is venerated by Muslims worldwide. The Tashkent Islamic University, founded in 1999 by a decree of President Islam Karimov, is the site of active work in that area. Today, it is the only State institution of higher learning of its kind in all of Central Asia. Some 700 students are enrolled there in the department of Islamic law, economics and natural sciences and the department of the history and philosophy of Islam. In addition, there is a continuing education division, as well as an Islamic Studies Research Centre. Much is being done to develop students' religious awareness and world view, in keeping with the spiritual values of our people. Peace and mutual respect among faiths have always been among those values.

Uzbekistan is distinguished by its unique ethnic diversity. More than 130 ethnic groups and peoples are represented in the Republic, and 16 religious faiths are practised. For this reason, maintaining tolerance has been elevated to the level of State policy since the earliest days of independence. Proceeding from the need to ensure peace and stability in the country, as well as to preserve the historical and philosophical heritage of our multi-ethnic people, President Karimov laid the theoretical foundations for inter-ethnic relations. The concept he developed is designed to protect the equal rights and liberties of all citizens of the Republic, regardless of ethnicity, religion or other distinctions, and to unite them around a single ideology. Experience has borne out this approach. We are proud to say today that people of all ethnicities are afforded every opportunity to study their native language, culture and art, folk crafts, customs and traditions. Newspapers and magazines are published in the languages of the larger ethnic communities, and there are radio and television broadcasts in those languages as well. Seven different languages are used as media of instruction in schools and higher education.

The work of the Republic International Cultural Centre and the ethnic cultural centres shows clearly how the policy of inter-ethnic harmony has been brought to the fore. The first 12 ethnic cultural associations came into existence in 1989, but were able to expand their activities in a real way only when independence was promulgated in Uzbekistan and the Republic International Cultural Centre was organized. For some 20 years now the Centre, established at the initiative of President Islam Karimov in January 1992, has been providing comprehensive practical assistance and support to the ethnic cultural centres and coordinating their activity. There are now upwards of 140 such centres. They have developed into respected community organizations that not only promote the fulfilment of citizens' growing ethnic and cultural needs, but also contribute to harmonizing inter-ethnic relations and strengthen the atmosphere of peace, friendship and harmony.

The Republic International Cultural Centre and the ethnic cultural centres regularly hold numerous and varied programmes, including concerts and other cultural events, national festivals and competitions, conferences and panel discussions, exhibits, lectures, discussions and much more.

The International Day for Tolerance is widely observed in Uzbekistan on 16 November each year, with various events dedicated to inter-ethnic tolerance marking the day. In addition to the ethnic cultural centres, other community and State organizations, colleges and universities and the National UNESCO Affairs Commission of the Cabinet of Ministers are involved in preparing and hosting those events. Tolerance-related issues are also considered at workshops held to mark Constitution Day. The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan serves as a guarantee of inter-ethnic and interfaith tolerance and civil harmony.

This year, the Republic International Cultural Centre is holding the Fourth Republic Festival of Friendship and Culture, entitled "Uzbekistan, Our Common Home", in cooperation with provincial councils and regional ethnic cultural centres, the national arts association *Tasvirii oina* and other State and community organizations.

Since 1995, the Republic International Cultural Centre has published more than a score of books in Uzbek and Russian on issues related to ethnic cultures, the theory and practice of civic unity, tolerance and building inter-ethnic and interfaith harmony. Titles include *The Culture of Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Independent*

Republic of Uzbekistan (1995), *Uzbekistan, Our Common Home* (2001), *Inter-ethnic Harmony and Religious Tolerance as a Factor in Progress* (2003) and others. *Uzbekistan, Country of Tolerance*, a collection of articles by prominent scholars and experts in inter-ethnic relations that was published in 2007, occupies a special place among the Centre's publications.

History offers many examples of people of diverse ethnicities and religions living for centuries like members of a single family. Uzbekistan, for millennia a locus of interaction and coexistence among the most varied ethnicities, religions, cultures and traditions, is one such case, and it is a persuasive one. Not only have various civilizations, including Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and others still more ancient, lived in close proximity there since ancient times, they have also complemented and enriched each other. Here in this land, we have seen the global mutual enrichment of world cultures. In independent Uzbekistan, these traditions have found important new avenues for development as a consequence of State policy and Uzbeks' historically respectful attitude towards people of other ethnicities, nationalities and religions.

The international community has more than once recognized that Uzbekistan has extensive experience in achieving mutual understanding among religions and could serve as a role model for other countries. Uzbekistan's wise policy, aimed precisely at such mutual understanding, not only fosters the preservation of an atmosphere of religious tolerance in our country, but also serves to ensure peace and stability in Central Asia as a whole.